

Pablo Casals: A Letter Written from Exile

Douglas W. Foard

There is a remarkable poignancy to this document written by Pablo Casals on May 6, 1940. Penned in the village of Prades, France, only a few miles from the Spanish border, it breathes the anguish of exile, the pain of shattered dreams, and a prophetic foreboding about the future.

Casals had moved to Prades not long after the sagging fortunes of the Spanish Republic had persuaded him in 1938 to abandon his native land and return to the relative safety of France. He had been a conspicuous champion of the Republican cause in Spain, but as one provincial capital after another succumbed to General Franco's forces in the year of the Munich Pact, the great cellist had been obliged to choose between exile or the notorious proceedings of a Nationalist military tribunal. Casals had prudently chosen the former course.¹

Events had demonstrated the wisdom of his decision. The last Republican hopes for a military victory that might have produced a negotiated settlement to the Spanish Civil War evaporated in November 1938, as General Franco's armies beat back a desperate Republican offensive on the Ebro River and stood poised to invade Catalonia, Casals's native province and a former bastion of the Second Republic. Twenty thousand Republican soldiers had perished in the operation and perhaps another fifty-five thousand were wounded or captured. Christmas 1938 brought a Nationalist counter-offensive, which within a month captured the Catalan capital, Barcelona, and on February 18, 1939, carried the Generalísimo's forces to the French border.

Pablo Casals's bitter trip into exile in 1938 had been the harbinger of a tragic tide that would follow the next year. The exhausted Republican armies disintegrated as the Nationalist forces poured into Catalonia and tens of thousands fled northward seeking safety from reprisals in the French Republic. According to one authoritative source, "The number of refugees who crossed into France from January to March 1939

ranges from a total of 400,000 to 527,000, of which approximately 220,000 were members of the military."²

Only three years earlier, at the beginning of the civil war in Spain, the French government had been in the hands of Léon Blum, a socialist, who had evidenced much sympathy but little tangible support for the Republican regime in Madrid. In 1939, it was Edouard Daladier, a signatory of the Munich Pact, who ruled in Paris. While he opened the Pyrenean border to the humbled Spanish Republicans, Daladier offered them a meager welcome. "They were received as though they were tramps," one eye-witness grumbled. "I have never seen eyes of such anger and helplessness as those of the Spaniards," he continued. "They stood as turned to stone, and they did not understand."³

Other sources recall a much friendlier reception; yet it cannot be doubted that the sudden arrival of nearly half a million hungry refugees constituted a considerable drain on the French Republic's available resources. The president of the former Basque government, José Antonio de Aguirre, personally observed the migration and commented, "For this immense caravan of people without country and without homes there was no hope of hospitality other than the concentration camp."⁴

Fifteen of these camps were established in France during the course of 1939. To be near them and to his own beloved Catalonia, Pablo Casals had moved from Paris to Prades to observe conditions for himself and to offer whatever assistance he could to his fellow countrymen. His letter of May 6, 1940, begins by thanking two acquaintances for their thirty-dollar contribution to the refugees' cause.

Although the term *concentration camp* had not yet acquired the murderous connotations that Hitler's Third Reich would add to it, the French versions of 1939 were clearly not intended to encourage long-term occupancy. In 1970, Casals still had the following bitter recollections of the accommodations accorded to his countrymen:

Prague 6 mai 1940

Cher ami,

Je reçois avec tant de plaisir votre lettre, si bonne, et j'apprécie profondément votre chèque de 30 Dollars - Recevez mes remerciements de coeur et je vous prie de remercier pour moi Mestian Vackovick et Vankova - Aujourd'hui même j'ai visité la Maternité d'Elne (Lyn. Or.) et j'ai pu distribuer l'équivalent de votre don - Je m'occupe beaucoup de cette Maternité Suisse d'Elne - Les femmes, toutes espagnoles, et les bébés y sont admirablement soignées - mais ces femmes ont tant et tant sans un sou et c'est bon de leur faire de temps à temps un petit cadeau en argent pour se procurer de petites choses nécessaires -

Les camps sont plus dégagés maintenant à cause de la formation de Compagnies de Travail, mais étant militarisés ^{les hommes} ne gagnent que 50 centimes par jour - les hommes non valides - les femmes et les enfants

restent dans les Camps de Concentration.
Il faut aider tout cela et je peux
encore le faire quoique, j'écris tout
ce que je possède - En Espagne on
a confisqué Tous mes biens - même
ma maison - Tant que je survivrai
pour le Tâche que je me suis imposée
je resterai ici -

Je ne sais pas si l'
Amérique se rendra compte
de ce qui se passe ici - Il y a une
bête féroce qui ravage tout et
qui par la peur et la terreur grand
et attrait une nation après l'
autre - L'indignation que est état
de choses puisse provoquer chez
vous ou partout ailleurs n'a
plus de valeur - même valeur
moyenne - La seule attitude digne
est l'action - car il faut tuer
la bête qui, après tout, menace
tout le monde - L'Angleterre et
la France, en se défendant, elles
défendent toute les autres Nations
et celles-ci ne peuvent pas se
croiser les bras et laisser que
les Alliés de Tuerent en attendant.

Saluer les amis -
En sincère affection
votre

Pablo / a Vals

The scenes I witnessed might have been from *Dante's Inferno*. Tens of thousands of men and women and children were herded together like animals, penned in by barbed wire, housed--if one can call it that--in tents and crumbling shacks. There were not sanitation facilities or provisions for medical care. There was little water and barely enough food to keep the inmates from starvation. The camp at Argelès was typical. Here more than one hundred thousand refugees had been massed in open areas among sand dunes along the seashore. Though it was winter, they had been provided with no shelter whatsoever--many had burrowed holes in the wet sand to protect themselves from the pelting rains and bitter winds. The driftwood they gathered for fires to warm themselves was soon exhausted. Scores had perished from exposure, hunger, and disease.⁵

As shocking as conditions proved to be for the Spanish Republicans at Argelès, Barcerès (70,000 residents), and Saint Cyprien (30,000 residents), those who found refuge in them "were among the lucky ones," writes Paul Preston in his *Spanish Civil War*. Across the border, he claims, General Franco's contempt for the Republic's defenders revealed itself, "in the labor camps, the two million prisoners, and the 200,000 executions on which his dictatorship was built."⁶ Stanley Payne, another student of the Franco regime, disputes these figures and reminds his readers that:

Republican exiles who escaped to France were not free from imprisonment or death. Many were held in camps by French authorities for months under harsh conditions little or no better than those of some of the imprisoned in Spain, and German occupation forces later deported thousands to imprisonment or slave labor in Germany.⁷

While he could do little for the Republican veterans who labored in Franco's prison camps, Casals made the plight of the Spanish refugees in France his own. For the next several months, he embarked upon a furious schedule of fund-raising and benefit concerts whose proceeds were devoted to feeding and housing the residents of Argelès and its

counterparts in Pyrenean France.⁸ His letter of May 6 is a testimonial to the passion which targeted his genius to that enterprise. One factor which had prolonged the Spanish Civil War had been the hopes of the Republic's leadership that the violence which had been inflicted on their homeland would spill over into a general European conflict, obliging England and France at last to support the Second Republic against Franco and his German and Italian allies. Ironically, only six months after the Nationalist armies marched into Madrid and the Franco regime was accorded diplomatic recognition by the Western democracies, Nazi Germany invaded Poland and the second great European war of the century had begun.

Hitler's armies had sliced through Poland at breathtaking speed. The same aircraft which previously had battered Madrid and flattened Guernica now screamed down at Warsaw and shattered Polish defenses. Reflecting on these events, small wonder that Casals would write, "A ferocious beast is abroad that ravages everything and through crime and terror enslaves one nation after another."

He and thousands like him had understood the Spanish Civil War as a struggle against the beast called "Fascism." That it lurked in Spain there could be no doubt. The Fascist movement there had styled itself the "Falange" and like its counterparts elsewhere in Europe had extolled political violence, imperialism, militarism, dictatorship, and totalitarianism. With Franco's victory, the Falange had become a part of the nation's political establishment and the regime borrowed freely from its symbols and slogans. Falangists occupied key posts in the Franco government and the movement's adherents were not at all shy about urging in great public demonstrations that Spain now join its former German allies and enter the war against France. "Death to France," they shouted noisily from the plazas in Madrid.⁹

Across the border at Prades, Casals was writing his friends that, "England and France in defending themselves are defending humanity as well." On May 6, 1940, however, it was not proving a very spirited defense. Allied bombs had not rained down on Berlin in retaliation for German depredations against Warsaw nor had Allied armies sallied forth from the protection of the Maginot defenses to capture German cities in the West. So far, this newest European conflict had proved to

be a desultory affair marked primarily by angry speeches, isolated actions, and Polish suffering.

In the concentration camps in southern France, the onset of the war had actually brought some improvements for the resident Spaniards. As former Basque President Aguirre recalled, "The Basques...felt the cause of France to be their own, and 50,000 Basque immigrants signed the pledge offering to serve either at the front or in the factories, in this new battle for freedom."¹⁰ Casals's May 6 letter also notes that, "The mood at the camps has improved since the creation of the Labor Battalions." At the very moment that the Falangists in Madrid were calling for the destruction of France, thousands of former Spanish Republicans rallied to its defense.

In spite of Casals's characterization of the enemy of that springtime as "the beast that threatens the world," it was clear that the animal had changed its spots in the year that had elapsed since the end of the Spanish conflict and the onset of this new Great War. "Madrid shall be the Graveyard of Fascism," the proud banners of the Republic had proclaimed in the autumn of 1936 as the Spanish capital successfully resisted bombardment by German planes, Italian tanks, and Franco's legions. Across the globe, the conflict was portrayed by those who sympathized with the Spanish Republic as an epic duel between the force of democracy (the "Popular Front") and the proponents of Fascism. This Manichaeian appreciation of the civil war in Spain was abetted by Soviet propaganda since the USSR was the only great power openly to support the Republic. The fact that General Franco's cause was sustained by German aviation and Italian armor seemed only to validate the view that for some reason Spain had been chosen as the battlefield between two of the twentieth century's most powerful ideas.

The Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939 shattered that simplistic interpretation of events. By that instrument, the Soviet Union joined Nazi Germany in partitioning Poland and in echoing Hitler's propaganda against the "plutocratic democracies." The Popular Front ideal had perished and now England and France stood alone against "the beast."

Four days after Casals wrote to his friends from Prades, the beast struck again--this time against France itself. On May 10, 1940, the German armored movements were set in motion which would flank the Maginot line and bring the Third French Republic to its knees. By the terms of a humiliating peace treaty signed only six weeks after the onset of the

German attack, what remained of France had become a German satellite nation with its capital as Vichy. Prades and the nearby Spanish concentration camps were at its mercy.

"With the surrender of France and the establishment of the Vichy regime under the aging Marshall Pétain," Casals would later recall, "our situation at Prades became increasingly precarious." After one failed attempt to escape to the United States, this internationally celebrated champion of the Spanish Republic endured the next several years under the watchful eye of Vichy security forces, haunted all the while by the prospect of sudden arrest and increasing privation. His liberation came only with the collapse of the French collaborationist regime.

"Throughout the dark years of the war," he later confessed, "I had longed for that day when victory would mean the end of fascism and the liberation of the nations enslaved by it." The events of 1945 would disappoint him. Casals observed, "Though Hitler and Mussolini had been crushed, the fascist dictatorship they had fostered in Spain remained in power." When the victorious Western democracies eschewed intervention in his homeland to bring down the Franco dictatorship, Pablo Casals cancelled future concert performances, returned to exile in Prades, and refused all efforts to entice him back to Spain while the despised "Caudillo" ruled from Madrid.¹¹ Franco survived Casals by two years. The cellist's exile, which seemed so circumstantial in May 1940, proved to be permanent.

¹ Albert E. Kahn, *Joys and Sorrows: Reflections by Pablo Casals* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), pp. 224-29.

² James E. Cortada, "Republican Refugees" in *Historical Dictionary of the Spanish Civil War*, James W. Cortada, ed. (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1982), pp. 414-15.

³ Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), p. 166.

⁴ José Antonio de Aguirre, *Escape vía Berlin*, intro. Robert P. Clark (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), p. 105.

⁵ Kahn, op. cit., p. 233.

⁶ Preston, op. cit., p. 166.

⁷ Stanley G. Payne, *The Franco Regime* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 224n.

⁸ Kahn, pp. 234-35.

⁹ Stanley G. Payne, *Falange: A History of Spanish Fascism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), pp. 206-211; see also, Benjamin Welles, *Spain: The Gentle Anarchy* (New York: Praeger, Inc., 1965), p. 217.

¹⁰ Aguirre, op. cit., p. 105.

¹¹ Kahn, op. cit., pp. 236-38 and 256-58.